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The Role of School in Preventing the Marginalization of Poor Students

For years, the problem of material shortages has been a subject of interest to representatives of a number of scientific disciplines. A particularly important issue is the poverty of children. UNICEF, in its latest report on poverty among children, reveals some alarming statistics: 30 million children in 35 OECD countries live in poverty, and more than 13 million children in the European Union do not have access to basic goods, necessary for their normal development <<http://www.unicef.pl/Co-robimy/Prawa-dziecka/Biezace-dzialania/Biezace-dzialania/Ubestwo-Dzieci-Raport-UNICEF>> (14.12.2014).

The basis for the increasing inequalities are, inter alia, rapid changes, as a result of which more and more people live below human dignity (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2005, p. 9).

The main purpose of this article is to undertake a theoretical analysis on the students affected by material poverty and the role of the school in overcoming this problem, respecting the dignity of the people who experience it. The research problems are as follows: What are the causes of the marginalization of poor students? How can the school counteract the exclusion of poor students? What is the role of the peers of students from poor families?

1. Material poverty – a problem of humanity

Poverty is one of the largest and most common problems facing the world. There are countries where only a small part of society is poor, but

there are also some where poverty affects a significant or even predominant number of people. The effects of poverty do not extend only to the poor, but also – especially with regard to its persistence and prevalence – to the rest of society, including the well-to-do in material terms, as they raise many adverse phenomena, ranging from the biological and social degradation of the poor and their families, to pathological behaviors such as alcoholism, drug abuse and crime (Sztumski, 1995, p. 43).

This situation arises from injustice, which is not lacking in today's world. It happens when some people acquire a disproportionately large share of the riches, and then isolate themselves from the rest of society (Zuziak, 2003, p. 73). There is a wide gap between people, which is evident in an increase in the number of people in extreme groups of the lowest and the highest income and the automatic reduction in the size of the group with an average income. This situation favors the extension of the poverty and social problems related to it. The problem, however, is not in the fact of material possession, but in the way we use it.

Wealth often increases risks associated with selfish greed, the lust for possession, sloth, erotic seductions and unfairness. This, in turn, causes a threat both to the community and to the individual (Zwoliński, 2002, p. 251). Plato, in his major work *The Republic*, asserts that a person trying to gain wealth intensifies their own greed, which becomes a major obstacle in their spiritual development. "Excessive wealth extremely relaxes, creates a lap of luxury and triggers subversive actions" (Plato, 1994, p. 113). The problem of "unnecessary needs", which distracts man from what really counts and what fills human life with meaning, was also noticed by the ancient Christian moralists. They called on us to search for real values, thanks to which we will "grow" as a person, when they were complaining about so called *polyktemosyne* (having an exaggerated number of things) (Plato, 1994, p. 52–53).

War, hatred and the division of humanity into the rich and the poor contribute to poverty, and hence to the dehumanization of those who must endure it. The power of the needy and unlimited quest for prosperity multiplies the concentration of both material and spiritual poverty. And, even though food production is increasing faster than population

growth, a significant number of people die of hunger. Children are in a particularly difficult situation. The cause of this is a big waste of livelihood in the hands of the rich, while this could actually feed all the hungry (Plato, 1994, p. 272). The ground of the growing poverty is also mainly in the capitalist economy and the resulting unemployment, as well as in the inability to exist in the new system due to the habit to place the causes of action in relation to State institutions. This situation is made more difficult to overcome because the institutions responsible for social assistance do not have adequate funds to help people in need and restrict their support to the most drastic situations.

Children are those who feel penury most acutely. They often suffer because of hunger and malnutrition. From the earliest years of their lives, they grapple with inequalities in access to healthcare, education or culture. "Child poverty is not just a childhood in penury, but also the danger of being poor in their adult lives. There is also the danger of a generational transmission of conditions, excluding individuals and entire families from various forms of participation in social life, launching them to the margins of social life" (Tarkowska, <www.eapn.org.pl/expert/files/Ubostwo%20dzieci.pdf> [14.11.2014]).

2. Marginalisation of the poor students

People affected by poverty, limited by the economic barrier, may not fully meet the standards of participation in social life, while poor students are not always able to adapt to the realities of school life. This is most often connected with the exclusion, rejection and isolation of poor children and young people. In the literature on the subject, the term subculture of poverty is used to describe people excluded because of poverty. The man who "is caught within the influence of the subculture, is subject to many psychosocial mechanisms determining his attitude and behavior" (Mańka, Roter, 1995, p. 232).

As a result, students affected by poverty fall into even greater poverty. They have a sense of inferiority, rejection and lack of acceptance

(Mańka, Roter, 1995, p. 232). In such a situation, a big role and responsibility lies in the hands of the entire school environment, who, by helping the needy, has a chance to protect them from permanent and increasing physical and moral degradation.

A poor young man, due to the situation he faces, has limited options in choosing the roles which are put in front of him by school and peers. The inability to fulfil those roles makes people around the young person assign them a "label" and its characteristic features, behaviors and attitudes (Mańka, Roter, 1995, p. 232). As a result, this individual is pushed to the margins and is not accepted in their environment. Over time, this person begins to actually behave in the way they are expected.

Poverty, if it is not properly addressed by the public, leads to the de-personalization of both the poor and those living in the midst of the needy. The former group receives a label, are rejected, pushed into the margin and stigmatized, and the latter do not use the chance to fulfil themselves as people. They prefer an easy life, filled with criticism of those who are in a difficult situation.

Everyday school life provides many examples of the stigma, marginalization and exclusion of poor students. It can be easily observed when school trips are organised for the whole school, rather than for the class, because the cost exceeds the capabilities of students within a class unit. So here are multi-day trips to attractive places, aimed at the integration of students, which in fact, merge only the wealthy, and exclude the poor (Tarkowska, Górniak, Kalbarczyk, 2006, p. 32). In this way, the students at school receive a kind of "stigma syndrome" (expression by author) associated with their origin (Kwieciński, 1995, p. 172). Branding, stigmatization and bullying are ever-present phenomena at schools (Dudzikowa, 2004). In the case of students living in harsh material conditions, this has particularly destructive consequences for their educational aspirations.

The segregation occurring in schools takes different forms. Examples include: separation of classes with better and worse students, meals (free and paid), trips for wealthier students, and many others (Tarkowska, Górniak, Kalbarczyk, 2006, p. 32). This type of action can be conscious

and unconscious, explicit and implicit. Particularly dangerous are the situations in which these practices are not carried out intentionally, because then no one sees their destructive educational influence.

3. The personal implementation of marginalized students – a challenge for a school

Students from poor families often have low educational aspirations. “[...] Children living in community houses do not pay attention at lessons, they lack successes in learning, they fear teachers, school is a stress factor” (Matyjas, 2008, p. 185). Undoubtedly, this is due to the relationship between parents and children and to the lack of a home atmosphere. Parents do not have time for their children, do not deal with them properly, they do not praise the child who is often left alone.

The aim of the idea of equalization of opportunities is, “that the achieved education level is not correlated with the characteristics of students assigned by birth” (Konarzewski, 2001, p. 136). A family dealing with poverty and unemployment has a destructive impact on all its members, particularly children. This family is not able to buy school books and school aids and help with learning difficulties. Those in need often do not find support in educational institutions. The researchers emphasize the significant role of nursery and early childhood education in the process of opportunities equalization. This is not conducive to the process of liquidation of kindergartens and the lowest percentage of children attending kindergartens in Europe (Tarkowska, Górniak, Kalbarczyk, 2006, p. 30).

The education system in Poland has a lot of features that point to the existence of mechanisms for maintaining or even increasing social differences. According to the critics, this situation has occurred as a result of a misconception. It turns out that it is not junior high school, but kindergarten and the first grade of elementary school that decide to equalize opportunities (Tarkowska, Górniak, Kalbarczyk, 2006, p. 30). Czesław Kupisiewicz goes even further in his reflections, saying that “There was, and still is no appreciation of the fact that, in many cases, educating children

is the only way to overcome poverty and to interrupt the vicious circle of cultural deprivation" (Kupisiewicz, 2006, p. 133).

Students from poor backgrounds face numerous problems including: the lack of educational aspirations, career patterns, with no place to learn, as well as numerous psychological barriers such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence and faith in their own abilities. Other difficulties which are being experienced by poor students are associated with the purchase of textbooks (despite a set of textbooks and workbooks, granted by social assistance centres at the beginning of the school year). These children often cannot expect help from their parents in homework. Tutoring, which is fashionable today, is out of the reach of students from poor families, which puts them at a disadvantage.

In addition, the lack of money for commuting and school aids, the lack of understanding from teachers and peers and exposure to shame and humiliation associated with different shortages may discourage them from attending school, eventually contributing to the early end of education. According to the researchers, children from poor families, with low cultural capital and from neglected and marginalized communities, "deprived of education at home, do not find it at school, either" (Lustig, 1996, p. 67).

Schools, whose fundamental mission is education and the upbringing of children, should be included in the wider area of social assistance. They have a chance to play an invaluable role in reducing poverty, if properly organized. John Paul II, addressing the issue of education and poverty, stated that it is impossible to solve the problems of poverty without including education (John Paul II, 1987, p. 23–24).

Why do the activities carried out by schools for poor students bring so poor results? What prevents the institution closest to the child – right after their own family – from being able to stop the poverty, from helping the student to have the chance to "go far" in spite of his material situation? A study by Eliżbieta Tarkowska, Katarzyna Górniak and Agnieszka Kalbarczyk revealed the following problems (2006). First of all, the school's didactic function is dominant over its caregiving and educational role. Teachers are not prepared to deal with the problem of poverty, to work with students and parents from poor homes. A major concern is

to downplay or not notice poverty, or even deny its presence at school. It is also characteristic to come across the attitude of: "poverty is a problem for social welfare institutions". Schools lack a system for finding solutions in the field of action against poverty; favouring ad hoc aid over long term aid. The help offered by school often brings negative effects, causing the stigmatization of students from poor environments (Tarkowska, Górniak, Kalbarczyk, 2006, p. 31–32).

The schools' directors offer financial assistance, inter alia, of the motivational nature, coming from the funds granted for this purpose by the directing body. This assistance is targeted to students who have obtained a high average academic achievement in the semester preceding the period of the award of the scholarship or have obtained excellent results in sporting competitions at, at least, the extramural level.

As part of the material aid, there are also programmes organized by the Ministry of National Education, which are supposed to meet the costs of learning, at least, partially. This primarily means a set of textbooks needed for children from poor families, who have just started learning.

An important form of assistance is the provision of free meals at schools. The most important source of this type is the government program: "State aid in the field of nutrition". All poor children from families whose income per person does not exceed a certain amount of money are allowed to take part in it (Banasiewicz, www.wrotamalopolski.pl [08.04.2009r.]).

Looking at the approach of schools to students from poor families, it can be said that the schools focus mainly on complementing the current shortage. Among the actions with long term effects, there are extracurricular activities aimed at raising the students' knowledge, circles of interest and compensation lessons (Tarkowska, Górniak, Kalbarczyk, 2006, p. 32).

Educators must be trained to create such conditions so as to foster the intellectual, ethical and emotional development of the students, which would make the supreme moral values, such as: life, science, work, fatherland, truth, goodness and beauty the signs of their lives and the prime trigger of their personality development. This upbringing, focused

on fundamental values, especially on the dignity of the person, becomes the right direction towards humanity.

4. Forms of assistance to the needy students

The attacks on the neediest ones confirm that, paradoxically, the more a man gets as he apparently reaches the top of his humanity, the weaker and poorer he becomes. Why are there so many atrocities at a time when the world has dozens of conventions, constitutions and other acts to protect human life and dignity? Krzysztof Warecki and Sebastian Karczewski (2004), making this reflection, quote a sentence uttered by politicians and educators that the only authentic friend of man is a morally healthy family. That's why it so is essential for every government to care about the family's physical and spiritual well-being. Only in a healthy family can a child learn about love, without which the world cannot live in peace (Karczewski, Warecki, 2004, p. 10–12).

What is the role of the modern school in the field of material poverty? It should, above all, try to remove people, at an early age, from the non-personal existence (Verhack, 1999, p. 80), to help people immersed in poverty in the wider sense. It should also help children to understand the meaning of existence and themselves from the inside out, which means a lot more than the ability to meet the needs of the individual.

Material and social support provided for the children from the school is not an antidote to a child's exclusion from peer groups. There is an urgent need for a policy of redistribution, which assists children in a non-stigmatising way, not by increasing unemployment benefits, but by opposing the exclusion of poor children by classmates in a manner worthy of a human being.

How should we, therefore, help poor students? "School is not only a place for the education and upbringing of young people, but also for the provision of assistance to students who need it, for example, due to health status, personality characteristics, learning disabilities, and, especially nowadays, material aid for the sake of the family" (M. Łoskot, 2008).

It's usually at school where the first problems and troubles resulting from the impact of a disadvantaged child's family are revealed. "An important operation of the school is, first and foremost, to accurately diagnose the circumstances, in order to obtain the broadest possible knowledge about the situation of students, alumni" (J. Stec, 2008). It is very often a teacher who is the first person that tries to direct a child and his family to the relevant institutions in order to obtain aid to prevent the aggravation of certain dysfunctions. "Help for a child from the poorest of families should be provided comprehensively and coordinated by school so that their family does not have to look for help in various institutions and with various results" (M. Łoskot, 2008).

A very important form of any school's assistance to its poor students is the school's emphasis on the learning process, overcoming school failure, achieving good educational results, creating opportunities and prospects for the future, which in turn results in real equalization of educational opportunities for children and young people from poor families. In addition, extracurricular lessons are long-term activities aimed at raising knowledge (Cęcelek, 2010, p. 8).

Direct material aid to poor students in Poland is granted by the vojt, Mayor or President of the city, from targeted subsidies in the state budget. It is distributed to students who are in difficult material circumstances resulting from the low income of their family. Within the scholarship, a student may apply for the partial or total cost of participation in educational activities and educational material aid, such as the purchase of textbooks or school supplies (Banasiewicz, www.wrotamalopolski.pl [08.04.2009]).

In addition, non-governmental organizations carry out the feeding of underprivileged students, especially the Polish Humanitarian Action, which has developed the programme, *Pajacyk (Puppet Clown)*. Recently, it has also become possible to finance school meal programmes through grants from the EU. Despite these additional actions, there is still a large number of children in need who do not receive meals (Banasiewicz, www.wrotamalopolski.pl [08.04.2009]).

5. Children and young people versus people in need

Work on the evolution and development of social skills is one of the essential components of social prevention which has the greatest chance of success among children (Śliwerski, 1999, p. 78–101). It is because very young people, unlike adults in middle or old age, are not burdened with negative stereotypes and syndromes about those who do not succeed in life. Axiological void of the transition period additionally justifies the promotion of such values and attitudes as the dignity of the person and respect for the dignity of another human being, honesty, tolerance, subjectivity (Melosik, 2001, p. 19–21).

If a man at home, at school, at the age of a child understands what it means to serve those who have material problems, they will always be ready to support others. Different activities which alert children to the problem of hunger and poverty play a very important role in the today's world. Some examples include: "Children to nameless children" (Piotrowski, 2007, p. 106–107), collecting money, clothing and toys for the poor at home and abroad, contributions to a sick friend or a colleague, all fundraisers held before Christmas, aid to victims of natural disasters, or to missions.

Also, all forms of involvement of young people in voluntary work are worth mentioning. Children and young people have been working for the sick, disabled, addicts, children from deprived backgrounds, children and youth with learning difficulties, elderly people living alone, unemployed, homeless and at risk of becoming homeless, victims of natural disasters and residents of poor and neglected regions of the world. In addition to the work done directly in agencies, young volunteers organize different events and collections. Thanks to their work they acquire financial resources which shall be forwarded to the mission, the purchase of medicines or food (Kosiedowska, Braun, 1997, p. 45).

The involvement of young people in voluntary work is also evident in child education-caring, sociotherapeutic day-care rooms, in orphanages, social welfare homes and in a number of non-governmental organizations and institutions. Young people often become systematic

(long-term) volunteers or one-time (short-term) volunteers – when there is a specific need (*How to find and keep the volunteer*, 2003, p. 19).

In educating people to overcome poverty, it is essential that the poor themselves learn to respect each other and not to view their situation as victims who have to endure it as a punishment. Experiencing poverty can become a valuable lesson for the rich and show them what values are the most important in life. In fact, it is the interior of a man that decides whether we call him rich or poor. Clement of Alexandria speaks these words in the above case: “So truly and beautifully rich is a man rich in virtues [...] and he is seemingly rich who lives in the lap of luxury and puts his life in external goods – because these pass away and vanish, some day someone else will take them, and in the end, no one will possess them anymore” (Clement of Alexandria, 1953, p. 13).

The beauty of poverty lies in courage, through which many of the poor still do not lose hope. Although poverty itself, hunger or the cold do not inspire awe, the willingness to disregard them, smiling and continuing life without a doubt, are worthy of everyone’s admiration. They teach a valuable lesson, especially now, for a substantial majority enslaved by lust for possessions.

Conclusion

Extensive literature on poverty, particularly poor families and children, shows their helplessness in different spheres of life. Poverty is taking a devastating toll on the lives of the entire family. Parents cannot afford textbooks and school aids. Statistics show that education in Poland only appears to be free of charge. In addition, families affected by poverty are not aided by educational institutions. Tomasz Szlendak writes about “the overshadowing of preschool education and family education in the socialization practice of state and local governments” (Szendak, 2003, p. 14).

Undoubtedly, therefore, a very important challenge for the modern school is to seek a new paradigm that could form the basis for today’s

discussion on the issues related to the life of the poor and support for those who want help. One-off donations, all kinds of funding, while undoubtedly constituting a valuable help, constitute help only in the short term. Moreover, the reform of the education system, geared toward leveling educational opportunities is designed to begin at the middle school, not kindergarten, which puts into question its effectiveness (Tarkowska, <www.eapn.org.pl/expert/files/Ubostwo%20dzieci.pdf> [14.11.2014]).

Approaching the problem of poverty, schools may undertake various activities in order to prevent social marginalization concerning children and young people from poor families. In addition, schools should change stereotypes, thus emphasizing the value and dignity of every human person.

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Abstract

Poverty, if it is not properly viewed by the public, may lead to the depersonalization of both poor and living in the midst of those who need help. Poverty is experienced by children in a specific way. They often suffer from hunger, they are undernourished, and they have limited access to a variety of goods, including culture and education. This, in turn, is often reflected in their self-esteem, a sense of self-dignity.

The role of the school in fighting the poverty of the students is shown in this article. The existing forms of aid to poor students are presented, as well as the challenges facing the school in terms of helping marginalized students. It is also crucial for the teachers themselves to be trained in such a way that would promote not only the intellectual development of the students, but most of all – the pro-social attitudes and that would emphasize the value and dignity of a person.

Keywords: person, human dignity, students' poverty, self-fulfilment.

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